

Review

Rosie Meade & Fiona Dukelow (2015). *Defining Events: Power, resistance and identity in twenty-first-century Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 274 Pages, Paperback £ 14.00.

This publication hooked me from the start with a wonderful, stimulating introduction. The book sets out to analyse and critique twenty-first-century Ireland while ‘consciously avoiding myth making and generalisation’. Examining a wide range of defining events, authors were encouraged to ‘take stock of contexts and contradictions’, ‘think ‘dialectically’’ and not ‘celebrate uncritically or damn unequivocally’. Useful discussions of the concepts of power, resistance and identity set the scene for the chapters to follow but also indicate where readers might expect contributing authors to vary in their understanding of these concepts or the emphases they bring to their analyses.

From the start, then, though the book is underpinned by a commitment to progressive social change, it is clear the reader will be spared any shallow, anti-establishment ranting (albeit this has its place!). The editors rightly praise the authors of chapters for avoiding crude polarisations, for discussing the interplay between social structure and human agency, for complicating and questioning popular assumptions and for looking at how resistance and change both affect, and are affected by, policy-making from above and social movement from below.

There then follows a number of chapters examining a wide variety of events, case-studies or aspects of Irish economic, political, social and cultural life. These are, respectively: the growth of alternative media, ‘development’ and the Celtic Tiger, love and same-sex marriage, ‘race’ and the Irish Citizenship Referendum, the Dundrum shopping centre, the introduction of ASBOs, police accountability, government support for neoliberalism and private banks, the Older People’s Uprising,

cutting back on equality, the Ryan Report on reformatory and industrial schools and 'coming out' in contemporary Ireland.

Depending on particular interests, readers will likely approach this variety of subject matter in different ways, finding some contributions more interesting or relevant than others, so I hesitate to highlight individual chapters for praise or critique since another reader would surely produce a different or even opposing narrative. But that's what reviewers are paid for (only kidding, obviously!) so, with reference to just a few of the chapters, I'll say that from my own standpoint as a non-Irish outsider, I found the chapter on race and citizenship an excellent exploration of the topic: it discusses theories of bloodlines versus place-of-birth in relation to citizenship, shows how a state can be both racist and anti-racist at the same time and argues that the Irish Citizenship Act has become racialised, reverting to 18th and 19th century ideas of national identity, something seen as natural and immutable rather than fluid and negotiable. The chapter on government support for neoliberalism and private banks was also excellent, both a theoretical exploration of what neoliberalism does and does not mean – not as straightforward as I had previously thought - as well as a case-study of how it manages to operate and continually re-invent itself in practice, despite its shortcomings and the resistance it provokes, even able to procure massive bailouts for private banks with no one quite sure how it all came about. The chapter on equality was another example of the book successfully illuminating theory, through its discussion of equality of 'opportunity' versus equality of 'condition', and then bringing this to bear on concrete examples and case-studies.

If forced to be critical, I'd say that the chapter on development (of a motorway, through an archeological landscape) sounded rhetorical at times and, while the critique of what was wrong was fine, the chapter might have benefited from suggestions of what alternative actions could or should have been taken instead. Similarly, I felt that alternative suggestions from 'protest' to 'proposal' could also have strengthened the critique of the Dundrum shopping centre. And while it was

enlightening to learn of the range of actors involved in the history of reformatory and industrial schools, and how it was lazy and over simplistic to blame only the Catholic church for child abuse, I sometimes wondered if the author wasn't being a bit over-defensive of the church.

But this is nitpicking. All the chapters were enlightening and well-written and the range of subject matter offers a kaleidoscopic view of Irish society and attempts to bring about social change. The book's success was far from inevitable: with such a range of topics it could have been fragmented and piecemeal, a collection of parts rather than a cohesive whole. But the chapters complement each other superbly and with frequent internal cross-referencing; readers are left in little doubt that the book is well-edited and constitutes a single coherent publication rather than a collection of disparate articles, not always the case with edited books. I think it does a great job of both informing readers about contemporary Ireland, and also providing potential writers and editors with ideas for doing something similar in other countries and places.

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